
HELPS FOR DEPRESSION

Although depression is a common experience for people, it is very difficult to cope with, and disrupts life significantly. Below are some guidelines that I have developed after working with depressed people for over 12 years as a Christian psychotherapist. These seem to be the most helpful, and to provide significant relief for people most of the time. There is no quick fix for depression; it is a process to walk out of the darkness of depression into the light of joy. But it is VERY possible to overcome depression. Besides what is listed below, I encourage you to make an appointment with your physician, to discuss if an anti-depressant might be appropriate for you.

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1. Identify triggers, life situations, and specific events/losses: Work toward understanding what specific problems in your life are contributing to your depression. Determine when the depression started – what changed in your life to cause it, or what stressors have been with you over time that have worn you down emotionally. **After identifying these things, work with a therapist or other trusted person to develop an action plan that will move you forward and through to a better place emotionally.**
2. Identify your thoughts: Listen to what you are telling yourself. All of us respond to and interpret the things that happen to us in an effort to understand our experiences and our world. Often we unconsciously respond and interpret in the same ways that we have in the past, whether or not those responses/interpretations are appropriate or accurate for the present situation. If these “automatic thoughts” are negative or dysfunctional in nature, emotional problems such as depression can easily arise from them. **When you are feeling particularly bad or anxious, figure out what you are thinking. Write these thoughts down, so that you can directly examine and refute them if they are depressive. Many Christians use Scripture to refute destructive thoughts.**
3. Identify your values: Work toward finding out what you truly value in life. People seem to find deeper joy and contentment when their lives reflect involvement in and commitment to things they deem the most important. They find their “purpose to live”, and their reason to keep striving toward healthy living. But first we have to know ourselves well enough to discover what those values are for us, individually. Christians frequently cite their relationship with Jesus Christ and living a Christian life as their highest value. **Take the time to complete this thought: I feel like my life is important and matters when I (fill in the blank).**
4. Identify what brings you joy: Depressed or not, in the course of our daily lives we usually find at least a few moments of joy. Seeing something beautiful, experiencing nature, connecting with God, a loved person or pet, accomplishing something, or living out your values (see #3 above) in some way result in joy. Try to notice these times in your life, and make note of them. **When you discover the things that bring you joy, increase your time of practice of those things.**
5. Exercise your body: Research has shown beyond doubt that exercise helps relieve depression. Begin with a short period of time and work up to a time that you are comfortable with, can do 4-5 times/week, and do not dread. The benefits of exercise will soon become obvious to you. **Find an activity that you would describe as “fun” that moves your body, and engage in the “fun” 4-5 times/week.**

6. Become part of a community: This is a challenging thing to do, and especially hard for those struggling with depression. Even if you are introverted by nature, we were all designed to connect with other people in meaningful ways. Find some kind of group to become a part of. It may be a support group for depressed people, a 12-step study, a Bible study, a small group at church, a neighborhood get-together time. **Push yourself to explore possible groups to become part of, and commit when you find the right fit.**

7. Practice thankfulness, and serve others: Even in the midst of our own suffering, we are taught in the Bible to be thankful. Although sometimes it seems there is nothing to be thankful for in our lives, a deeper look will reveal unchanging blessings, for example God's faithfulness and great love toward us, the Holy Spirit within us, and the freedom we have to gather with other Christians. Serving others is a way of outwardly expressing thankfulness, and paradoxically in serving others, joy is found. **Even if for a short time each week, find a place of service that is consistent with your giftedness and values.**

8. Suffering well: Although sounding impossible, it is possible for people to transcend their emotional pain enough to be able to continue to live their lives in functional ways while they are suffering with depression. For Christians, trusting in God's sovereignty, wisdom and love for us as his children gives us reason to have hope that our adversity can be used by God for His glory and our good. **Read Trusting God, by Jerry Bridges, and Afflictions of the Soul by Dennis Newkirk for understanding and living out the notion of "suffering well".**

Many good books exist on the problem of depression, and how to help yourself begin to feel better. Be sure to take care of your physical body by eating in healthy ways, sleeping enough, and creating margin time in your life to nurture important relationships.

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,
The bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
And my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope;
Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
For his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3: 19-23*